

**Metaethics:  
A Guide to Three Theories**

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*This thesis was written in honor of my late father, Peter Francis Borgnis.*

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## Introduction

### **I. The Good Life**




Say we are concerned with living a good life. There are two sets of questions we ask ourselves. The first set includes questions such as - where does knowledge of the good life come from, and what does the source of such knowledge look like? The second set includes questions such as - how do we live a good life, and what do the actions or beliefs compatible with such a life look like? The answers to those questions are often elusive. For guidance, people often turn to religion. For many religions, the good life we seek is a life of enlightenment. However, there is also a secular, philosophical answer: a life of morality.

The focus of this thesis is on the latter, secular approach. However, these moral matters are often difficult to grasp. In order to understand them, it is helpful to build a foundation on something more familiar, like religious guidance. Once we have an understanding of the good life from a religious approach, we can apply that framework to our philosophical one. Thus, understanding the philosophical perspective will be simple as the concepts are more familiar than we think.

### **II. Religion**

Suppose we are curious about living a life of enlightenment. We look to three different religions for guidance, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. While all three religions regard

reaching a status of enlightenment as the highest possible achievement, they all reach this same conclusion in different ways.<sup>1</sup> Buddhists derive both what it means to live an enlightened life, and how to go about doing so, from the Buddha. (Embree 1988) Next, move to Jainism. They too believe enlightenment stems from the Buddha, and derive what it means to live an enlightened life from his teachings. (Embree 1988) However, the Jains offer a different account than the Buddhists about *how* to live a life of enlightenment. They begin, and end, at the same place, but provide different paths to get from one point to the other. Finally, move to Hinduism. Hindus believe that enlightenment stems from a divine energy, and derive from that divinity what it means to live an enlightened life. (Embree 1988) Interestingly enough, they provide an account of *how* to live a life of enlightenment that is almost identical to the Buddhists, despite being derived from a different source.<sup>2</sup> From this layout we can construct the following figure.

<b>Religion/Starting Point</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>End Point</b>
Buddhism – <b>Buddha</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b>
Jainism – <b>Buddha</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b>
Hinduism – <b>Devine Energy</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b>

**Figure One – From Religion to Enlightenment**

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of my argument, let us suppose that all three religions define enlightenment in the same way.

<sup>2</sup> The information about Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism was also compiled with the help of the Buddhist counselor at the Mount Holyoke Betty Shabazz Center for Spirituality and Worship.

### III. Morality

Now, suppose we are concerned with the secular question of morality. We look to three main theories of morality for guidance, constructivism, relativism and realism.<sup>3</sup> All three theories aim to capture a truly moral life as the ultimate end result. However, they, like the competing religions, reach the same conclusion in different ways. Begin with constructivism.




Constructivists believe moral guidance stems from the standpoint of a specific type of agent. Given this particular standpoint, constructivists derive the moral facts that lead us to a life of morality. Move to relativism. Like the constructivists, relativists derive moral guidance from the standpoint of an agent. However, they have no constraints on what that agent looks like. Thus the relativist's path toward morality may look different from that of a constructivist. Finally, consider realism. Realists believe moral guidance is not derived from an agent, but from an agent independent source. Like the Hindus from the enlightenment example, realists begin at a fundamentally different place than the constructivists and relativists, but follow a familiar path and end up at morality just the same.

From this layout we can construct a figure similar to the one before.

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<sup>3</sup> While I am aware realism, relativism, and constructivism are metaethical theories, and therefore do not provide guidance on what a moral life ought to look like, or as I put it the 'path to morality', just bear with me. Assume, for now, they are analogous to the religions in respect to enlightenment.



<b>Theory of Morality/Starting Point</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>End Point</b>
Constructivism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>
Relativism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>
Realism – <b>Not agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>

**Figure Two – From Theory of Morality to Morality**

To see just how this analogy fits together, the figures can be compounded in the following way.

<b>Religion/Moral Theory – Starting point</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>End Point</b>
Buddhism – <b>Buddha</b> Constructivism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b> <b>Morality</b>
Jainism – <b>Buddha</b> Relativism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b> <b>Morality</b>
Hinduism – <b>Devine Energy</b> Realism – <b>Not agent</b>		<b>Enlightenment</b> <b>Morality</b>

**Figure 3 – From Religion/Theory of Morality to Enlightenment/Morality**

Thanks to the religion analogy, we have an understanding of the relationship of the ‘pathway’ and ‘starting point’ to the end morality. Given that our focus is on the secular, philosophical approach, we can set the religious analogy aside. With our attention focused on the theories of morality, we can begin to unravel the philosophical responses to our question of how to live a moral life.

#### IV. Ethics vs. Metaethics

Before we begin, differentiating between the *path* and *starting point* is essential. Each idea represents a separate branch of moral philosophy, ethics and metaethics respectively. Ethics explores claims about normative facts, that is, facts about what we ought, and ought not do. It is concerned with which actions or beliefs are right, and which actions or beliefs are wrong. In contrast, metaethics is concerned with the nature of those rights and wrongs, and where those concepts stem from. It is meant to explore the basis and subsequent implications of moral thought and practice. (Sayre-McCord 2014) In short, ethics explores what is, and is not, moral. Metaethics explores the nature of morality itself.

Given that realism, relativism, and constructivism are metaethical theories, my focus will be on the metaethical implications, and not on the ethical ones.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I will set all ethical matters aside. However, since metaethics and ethics are related, this thesis will, at times, bring ethical matters into the conversation.<sup>5</sup>

#### V. General Overview

Given the inherently complex nature of metaethical theories, it is often difficult to know which guide to follow. This project aims to pacify the debate and identify worthy metaethical guides. To accomplish this, I propose an objective set of guidelines any good metaethical theory ought to follow. I begin by exploring three prominent metaethical theories: realism, relativism,

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<sup>4</sup> Here is the distinction we set aside earlier. Constructivism, realism, and relativism are metaethical theories, not simply theories of morality.




<sup>5</sup> In the event that we must step out of the metaethical realm and into the ethical one, I will acknowledge that is happening and keep the detour short

and constructivism. To aid in this exploration, I rely on four prominent moral philosophers. Russ Shafer-Landau guides our examination of realism, Gilbert Harman takes the reins for relativism, and Sharon Street teams up with Christine Korsgaard to guide us through constructivism. Once this initial exploration is complete, I present the guidelines I will use to test the metaethical theories against. These guidelines, which I call the ‘Appeals’, are as follows: the Appeal to Knowledge, the Appeal to Universality, and the Appeal to Intuition. After the Appeals are established, it is time to put our metaethical theories to the test. The proverbial ‘last man standing’ should represent the best guide to the moral life we seek.

## Chapter One

### I. Introduction

The Introduction left off having outlined the transition between the metaethical starting point, and end goal of morality. We set aside the ethical ‘pathway’ component of morality, and focused on the metaethical ‘starting point’. We have also limited our scope to three prominent metaethical theories: realism, relativism, and constructivism.<sup>6</sup> If we are to assess whether these three theories meet the demands of a good metaethical theory, then we ought to have an understanding of each view. This first chapter is devoted to mapping out the intricacies of each metaethical position, and placing the theories in conversation with one another.

<b>Theory of Morality/Starting Point</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>End Point</b>
Constructivism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>
Relativism – <b>Agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>
Realism – <b>Not agent</b>		<b>Morality</b>

**Figure Two – From Theory of Morality to Morality**

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<sup>6</sup>As we will soon discover, both realism and constructivism split into two separate, yet related, theories. Realism breaks down into the naturalist and non-naturalist realists, and constructivism splits into Kantian and Humean constructivism.

Recall figure two from the Introduction. On the right side, we see that all three metaethical positions end up at morality.<sup>7</sup> However, as we move to the left side, we see that the theories can disagree about where that moral guidance comes from. Relativists and constructivists hold that morality is derived from the standpoint of an agent, while realists believe morality is agent independent, and derived from sources outside of ourselves. Additionally, there are disagreements between the constructivist and relativist view of what agent dependence looks like, but I will return to this later. For now, the focus is on the general conversation between the theories and where they stand in relation to one another. However, before we can begin our analysis of each individual metaethical theory, there are two distinctions that must be made.

The first distinction sets the general structure of how each theory will be presented and defined. Given the nature of moral philosophy, there are no universally accepted definitions for each theory. Prominent philosophers are often at odds over the details of the particular theories. To avoid confusion or potential discrepancies I will introduce our three metaethical theories in a strategic manner. First, I will provide a generalized account based on prominent accounts from the literature. Then, I will take the definitions a step further and discuss each theory in terms of a specific philosopher. I rely on Russ Shafer-Landau as my guide for realism, Gilbert Harman for relativism, and both Sharon Street and Christine Korsgaard for constructivism. It is important to note that once I've given the specific account of each theory, from then on I will be using the specific definition as opposed to the general one. For example, when I say 'realism' what I actually mean is 'realism according to Russ Shafer-Landau.'

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<sup>7</sup> Morality, as defined in the introduction, is the secular equivalent of a life of enlightenment, and is the goal for those concerned with living a moral life.

The second distinction explains the importance of a theory being agent dependent as opposed to agent independent.<sup>8</sup> When a theory is agent *dependent*, it relies on the standpoint of an agent in order to identify the moral facts. For example, as we will see with relativism, it is up to the agent to assess a given situation and determine whether or not particular moral facts apply. In contrast, when a theory is agent *independent*, it means that our knowledge of the moral facts is not dependent on the standpoint of an agent. (Street 2010) For example, as we will see with realism, it is *not* up to the agent to assess a given situation and determine whether or not particular moral facts apply. This is because the moral facts are objective, and therefore exist independently of whether or not we believe them.

To motivate the importance of the agency distinction, we must momentarily step out of the realm of moral philosophy, and consider the Euthyphro Problem as presented by Sharon Street.<sup>9</sup> Prior to Street's adaptation, this thought experiment was originally presented through a debate in Plato's *Euthyphro*. This thought experiment outlines the difference between things being valuable because *we* value them (agent dependent), and things being valuable because they themselves are valuable (agent independent). (Street 2010) When the Euthyphro problem is applied to morality, the debate switches to whether the moral facts are facts because *we* give them that status (agent dependent), or if the moral facts are facts because they *are* the moral facts (agent independent). Now that we are familiar with how realism, relativism and constructivism will be presented, and we can understand the distinction between agent dependence and independence, we may move forward and begin unraveling our three metaethical theories.

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<sup>8</sup> The distinction between agent dependence and agent independence is motivated by Street in the following paper; Street, Sharon. "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?" *Philosophy Compass*, 2010: 363-384

<sup>9</sup> Street's full Euthyphro argument can be read in the following paper; Street, Sharon. "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?" *Philosophy Compass*, 2010: 363-384

## II. Realism

The first metaethical theory is realism. For the specific account of realism, I rely on Russ Shafer-Landau.

In a general sense, realism is the view that there are objective moral facts, and therefore objective moral values. (Sayre-McCord 2015) For realists, moral facts exist independently of the standpoint of an agent. If moral facts are said to be *agent independent*, this means that their legitimacy is not dependent on the standpoint of any sort of agent. If an action or belief is morally right or wrong, that belief or action is right or wrong independently of what we believe. For example, a realist would say it is a moral fact that you ought not kick puppies. This means there is an objective moral fact that kicking puppies is wrong, and that such an act would be wrong even if I enjoyed kicking puppies.

To understand how agent independence is possible, consider that we believe non-moral facts are agent independent. Say I believe that gravity does not exist. No matter how intently I believe this to be true, gravity will never cease to exist. If I throw a rock, it will fall down, and this will always happen regardless of whether or not I believe gravity is a fact. Now, consider a moral case. Suppose it is a moral fact that you ought not ever lie. If it is true, then it is wrong for me to lie in any situation, even if there is a murderer at my door asking where my friend is. Given that the moral fact 'you ought not lie' is agent independent, lying would be wrong if I wanted to lie, it would be wrong if you wanted me to lie, and it would even be wrong if the whole world wanted me to lie. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

### **i. Naturalism, Non-Naturalism, and Nihilism**

Given the realist's agent independent standpoint, you can be a realist in one of three ways, two expected and one unexpected. The expected ones I will come back to later and the unexpected I will set aside because it is irrelevant given the aim of this thesis. The two expected subgroups are the naturalist realism and the non-naturalist realism.<sup>10</sup> The naturalist realists tell us that moral facts exist independently of an agent. For the naturalists, the moral facts are features of the natural world in the same way the natural facts are features of the natural world. (Ridge 2014) The non-naturalist realist would agree that the moral facts are agent independent, but they are *not* features of the natural world in the same way that the natural facts are. We have knowledge of these moral facts, but they are not accessible in the same way natural facts are. (Ridge 2014) While both the non-naturalists and the naturalists are realists, the distinction between the two schools becomes important later on. For now, the take away is that both forms of realism are agent independent, but disagree regarding the nature of the moral facts.

The unexpected form of realism is nihilism. While the majority of realists believe there are objective moral facts, there exist those who challenge that notion, namely the moral nihilist. Nihilism entails that there are no moral facts. (Sinnott-Armstrong 2015) In fact, the nihilists recognize that most of us believe there is a morality, but it is a false belief. To see why the nihilist is a potential problem for the realist, consider the following example. For the general population, if I have murdered, then I have done something morally wrong. For the realist, this is true because 'you ought not murder' is an objective moral fact.<sup>11</sup> However, for the nihilist, this is not the case. The wrongness of murder could not be based on a moral fact because there are no moral facts, and thus, murdering is not an inherently bad action in itself. However, murdering

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<sup>10</sup> Shafer-Landau is a non-naturalist realist.

<sup>11</sup> This fact holds true for both the naturalist and non-naturalist realist.



*does* seem like an inherently bad action in itself, and precisely why realists deny nihilism.

Considering I am entrenched in a debate between views that are interested in morality, then the existence of morality is implied. Given that the nihilist denies the morality exists, they have no place in this conversation. While we may be justified in discounting the nihilist, who believes there are no moral facts, we are not as justified in discounting those who believe that while there may be moral facts, we cannot know them. Such is the view of the moral skeptic. In the same way that realism's agent independence cannot exclude nihilism, it cannot exclude moral skepticism for similar reasons. The realist's argument against the view of the moral skeptic requires some work.

## ii. Moral Skepticism

There are two forms of moral skepticism, the extreme *objectivity skeptic*, and the less extreme *knowledge skeptic*.<sup>12</sup> The former doubts the existence of objective moral facts. The latter may not doubt their existence, but rather doubts our ability to know them. Begin with the objectivity skeptic. They argue that if the realist claims moral facts exist, then they ought to be able to verify how knowledge of them is possible. The objectivity skeptic believes the realist is unable to do so, and thus moral facts must not exist as they are unknowable. Move to the knowledge skeptic. This skeptic believes there are moral facts, but doubts that we can have any knowledge of them. They argue that if the realist claims there are agent independent, objective moral facts, then they ought to be able to show how we are to know them.<sup>13</sup> Like the objectivity skeptic, the knowledge skeptic doesn't believe the realist can show how we are able to know the

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<sup>12</sup> There are other forms of moral skepticism, but I choose these particular two based on the scope of this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> Given that the terminology of agent independent/dependent is from Street, the skeptic does not use this specific terminology. However, they do support this without specifically calling it agent independence. Since they are mainly criticizing the objectivity of the moral facts, they identify that this means they don't come from within us, but outside of us.

moral facts, and thus we cannot be justified in having knowledge of them. Since the realist's commitment to agent independent, objective moral facts opens the door to the moral skeptics, they ought to have a reply or else their theory crumbles.

### iii. Shafer-Landau vs. Moral Skepticism

In order to understand the realist's defense against the moral skeptic, we turn to Russ Shafer-Landau for a more specific account of realism.<sup>14</sup> The moral skeptic poses two key arguments against the realist.<sup>15</sup> The first argument is the Argument from Certainty. It is as follows. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

1. Knowledge requires certainty (A)
2. We can never be certain of the truth of our moral beliefs (A)
3. Therefore, we can never have moral knowledge (1,2)

Shafer-Landau argues that premise one is false. (Shafer-Landau 2004) There are many things we claim to know, but are not certain about. Such is the case for many mathematical facts. For example, we know that all odd numbers are products of their primes. Three times three is nine, five times five is twenty five, and so on. However, we cannot be certain this is true because there are infinite numbers. Since there are infinite numbers, we cannot go through all of them verify they fit the pattern. Yet this is still considered a mathematical fact. Realists argue moral facts function the same way. Even if we cannot test each one to be certain of its truth, that bears no weight on whether or not those facts exist.

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<sup>14</sup> Shafer-Landau may be a non-naturalist realist, but he also provides a defense of naturalist realism.

<sup>15</sup> In fact there are many more, but I choose these particular two based on the scope of this thesis.

The second argument the skeptics use against the realists is the Epistemic Argument from Disagreement. The argument is as follows. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

1. If well-informed, open-minded people intractably disagree about some claim, then we cannot know whether that claim is true (A)
2. Well-informed, open-minded people intractably disagree about all moral claims (A)
3. Therefore there can be no moral knowledge (1,2)

Shafer- Landau argues that premise one is false. (Shafer-Landau 2004) This is because he believes moral disagreements are completely unimportant. Even if you idealize a situation, and everyone in the argument was prepared and well informed, they may still disagree. Moral disagreement is not an insight into the truth, or falsity, of moral claims. It acts as an insight to disagreement in general. What it means to disagree about moral facts will become important later on in Chapter Two when I discuss the Appeal to Intuition.

#### **iv. Review**

Before we conclude our exploration of realism, it is beneficial to review where we've been. Realism is the view that there are agent independent, objective moral facts. The two types of moral realism which are of interest are the naturalist realists and the non-naturalist realists. The naturalist realists believe that the moral facts are knowable in the same way the natural facts are knowable. However, the non-naturalists disagree and believe the moral facts are not like the natural facts, but are knowable in an alternative manner. Shafer-Landau, a non-naturalist, was our guide for a more specific account of realism. His view became particularly important when defending realism against the objections of the moral skeptic, their greatest opponent.

### III. Relativism

The next moral theory is Relativism. For the more specific account of relativism I use Gilbert Harman as a guide.

In a general sense, relativism is the view that moral facts are context dependent, and rely on the standpoint of an agent. (Baghramian and Carter 2016) Such agent dependence means that moral facts do not come from outside of us, but are instead derived from something within ourselves.<sup>16</sup> Relativism's agent and context dependent facts entail that what is true for one agent may not be true for another, and vice versa. (Blackburn 2000)

#### i. Types

There are three ways in which you can be a relativist. The first type you can be is a cultural relativist. For this type, what the moral facts are, and what situations they apply to, is determined by cultural norms. For example, in some cultures, the moral standing of puppy kicking cannot be determined at an individual level, but at a cultural one. Some cultures may praise puppy kicking, while others may condone the same action.<sup>17</sup> The second type of relativist you can be is an individual relativist. For this type, what the moral facts are, and what situations they apply to, is determined by the individual. An individual relativist can shift between views as the situation and circumstances allow. Some individuals may believe that puppy kicking is always morally permissible. Others may believe it is only permissible in certain contexts, and yet others may believe puppy kicking is never morally permissible.<sup>18</sup> The third type of relativist you

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<sup>16</sup> Recall the realists believe the moral facts are agent independent.

<sup>17</sup> The cultural relativists are not of any particular interest here. I will set them aside and focus on the individual relativists.

<sup>18</sup> There are those who believe individual relativism is actually a form of realism, however it is not. For the realist because their moral facts are objective, the impermissibility of puppy kicking existed long before people started to believe kicking puppies was wrong. This is not the case for the relativist, as the morality of puppy kicking can only be determined when the puppy is about to be kicked.

can be is a frame of reference relativist. For this type, whether or not the moral facts apply to a situation cannot be determined until the frame of reference is identified. For example, to determine the moral permissibility of puppy kicking, cultural relativists consult their cultural norms, and individual relativists consult themselves. However, the frame of reference relativist pulls information from their surroundings and constructs a frame of reference. For the sake of this thesis, I set aside both the cultural and individual relativist, and focus on the third type, frame of reference relativism. It is worth noting that Gilbert Harman, who will lead our exploration, is a frame of reference relativist.

## ii. Parallel World Example

We already have an understanding of how the realist's agent independent, objective moral facts work. What we need now is an idea of how the relativist's agent and context dependent moral facts work. In order to fully understand the relativist's moral facts, consider the following parallel world example.

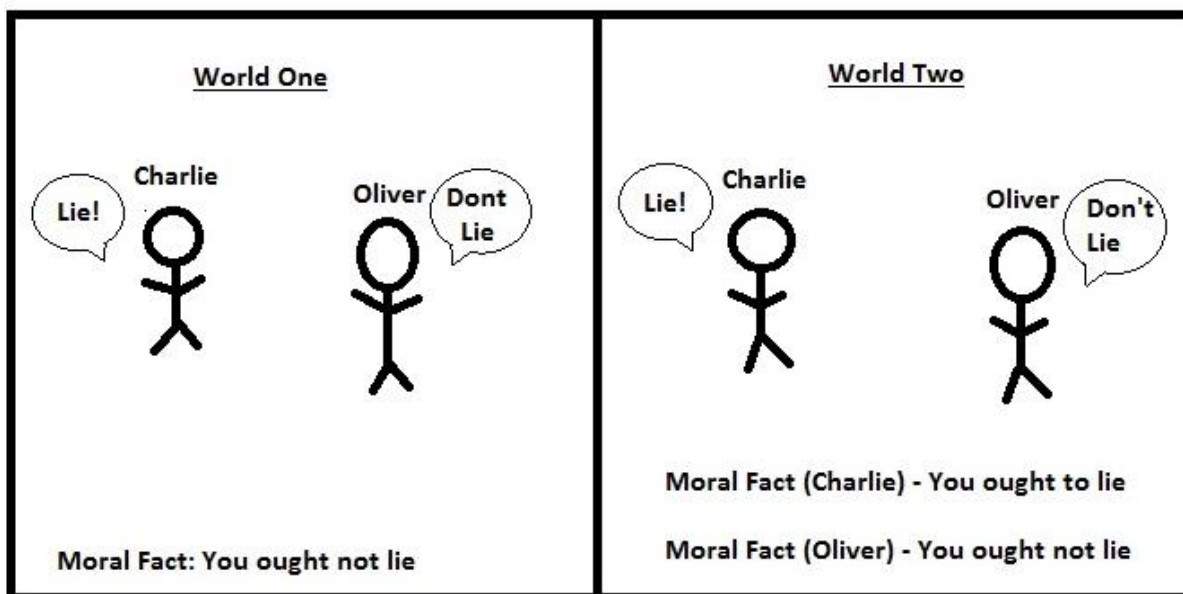


Figure Four – Parallel Worlds

There are two parallel worlds, and Charlie and Oliver are agents in each world. In the first world, World One, they are both realists and both committed to the moral fact that you ought not lie. Oliver abides by this moral fact and does not lie. However, while Charlie is committed to the moral fact that you ought not lie, he believes that it is okay to lie. Under the guidelines of World One, Charlie is acting upon a false belief given the moral fact that you ought not lie. If Charlie were to lie, he is doing something morally wrong because realism entails the facts exist regardless of whether or not he believes them. Oliver, on the other hand, is safe, as his belief that you ought not lie is consistent with the moral fact. In the second world, World Two, Charlie and Oliver are relativists. In this world, we cannot say there is a moral fact that you ought not lie, as moral facts are context dependent. However, what we can say is that there is a moral fact sub-Oliver that you ought not lie, and a moral fact sub-Charlie that you ought to lie. In contrast to World One, in World Two we cannot say either Charlie or Oliver have false beliefs. If the actions of the two agents are consistent with the beliefs of the two agents, then they are both morally correct even if they have different responses to a similar situation.

There is one more point which must be made before introducing Harman's specific account of relativism. This point requires stepping out of the metaethical realm and into the ethical one. The momentary shift in perspective offers a particularly helpful insight into the differences between the realists and relativists on an ethical level, which aids in our understanding of them on a metaethical one. As we have seen, the realists and relativists disagree on the nature of the moral facts and where they come from. While this is a major disagreement, it is important to note that they might actually agree on the majority of ethical claims. For example, it is unlikely that you will find a realist or a relativist who believes it is morally permissible to kick puppies for pleasure. While this ethical claim may be derived from

two different metaethical sources, it nonetheless provides a similar pathway to morality.<sup>19</sup> In fact there are relativists who believe relativism can capture everything that realism can in regard to the nature of morality despite coming from a context and agent dependent standpoint.

### iii. Harman

Now that we have a general understanding of relativism, it's time to narrow our scope to a specific philosopher. Gilbert Harman, a frame of reference relativist, will take the reins.

Recall from the realism section that Shafer-Landau believes the moral facts are objective. In contrast, Harman argues that the moral facts are not objective, as it is unlikely there could be one true morality. Instead, Harman believes that the moral facts are dependent on the context and the person or group making the judgement. (Harman 2000) To make sense of this, Harman relates moral facts to the world languages. Just as different people speak different languages, different people also have different moral values. Furthermore, he also identifies that moral facts accepted at one time may, or may not, be accepted at another. (Harman 2012) For example, when presented with a moral dilemma, two relativists could derive conflicting moral judgements.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that these two could be morally right relative to one frame of reference, or perspective, and morally wrong relative to another. (Harman 2012, 1) Furthermore, this sort of moral disagreement between relativists is important, as moral disagreement actually tells us something about the nature of morality. (Harman 2000) Harman argues that for any moral truth, it is possible for someone to have sufficient reason not to accept that truth. For example, suppose

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<sup>19</sup> There are even those who believe relativists can capture everything the realist can about the nature of morality despite coming from a subjective, agent dependent standpoint. Simon Blackburn is one of those people, and his argument can be found in his 1997 Q&A from *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. Blackwell, Simon. "Appendix." In *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, edited by Hugh LaFollette, 311-320. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc , 2000.

<sup>20</sup> We will get to why moral disagreement is not a problem for the relativist, but for now just know that Harman believes it's not a problem.

‘you ought not ever steal’ is a moral truth. Professional robbers, egomaniacs, or those committed to competing moral principles, may reject such a truth.

There are those who believe that robbers and the like disagree about the moral facts because they are simply mistaken as to what the moral facts are, or because they are incapable of understanding the moral facts. However, Harman argues that when someone disagrees with our moral values it is not because there is something wrong with them. Their reasons for denying what we believe the moral facts are go beyond simply overlooking our reasons for believing them. The robbers and egomaniacs are neither irrational, nor ignorant of the facts; they simply believe competing moral facts. (Harman 2000, 59) The moral facts a person accepts are the source of that person's moral reasoning, and thus give them reason to act in various ways. (Harman 2000, 68) However, Harman stresses that this does not always mean an agent gets to act however they want. In the event that the moral facts a person accepts conflict with those of others, they ought to reevaluate the moral principles they believe in. (Harman 2000, 68)

#### **iv. Objections to Relativism**

As we did with Shafer-Landau and the realists, we will use Harman to defend the relativists against key objections.

A common critique of relativism is that there is no way to know what moral facts the agents accept. For example, if you're a relativist, what stops you from believing the moral fact is that you ought to kick puppies? If it is the case that your moral reasoning justifies kicking puppies, does that mean relativists can go around kicking puppies without ever doing something morally wrong? This seems like a particularly important objection, as there must be something wrong with metaethical theory which condones kicking puppies. Furthermore, what does that



say about the kinds of agents your agent dependent theory relies on? Harman is able to dispel both of these worries. He argues that while there are cases in which the moral facts one agent accepts conflict with those of another, there is a way in which both agents come to agree on similar facts. This process is one of continual bargaining and adjustment. (Harman 2000, 58) In order to see how this works, consider Hume's boat rowing example. There are two rowers in a boat, each wanting to row at a different speed. The speed of the boat will initially fluctuate between the optimal speeds of each rower. However, eventually the boat will travel at a rate that may not be what each rower wants, but that both can agree on. (Harman 2000, 58)

Disagreements about what moral facts apply work the same way. If you say puppy kicking is okay, and I say it is not, we will eventually reach a conclusion we can both be happy with.

Relativism holds that there are no objective moral facts. Since that means there are no external reasons for justification, there must only be internal justifications. That means that the moral values you have vary depending on what moral facts you believe in. However, Harman recognizes that not every moral value that can be 'tied' to a moral truth is justifiable. There are boundaries which are determined by moral disagreements between agents in a given group. Just as the rowers of the boat vie for which speed to row at, the moral agents in a society vie for the most agreeable moral facts. There are those at all ends of the spectrum, but through those disagreements they are able to settle upon some semblance of unifiable morality.

## **v. Review**

Now that we have an understanding of relativism as told by Harman, we can move on to our final metaethical theory. However, as we did with realism before, I want to provide a brief summary of relativism. Relativists believe the moral facts are both context and agent dependent. (Baghramian and Carter 2016) For frame of reference relativists like Harman, the moral facts are

determined by the agent relative to the implicit disagreement they have entered into, as well as to what that agent believes. If two agents have a moral disagreement, it does not mean one is wrong, or mistaken about the nature of morality. It just means people hold conflicting moral values just as people speak different languages. In the face of moral disagreement, the agents will eventually reach a common decision through a process of continual bargaining and adjustment. (Harman 2000, 58)

## IV. Constructivism

### i. General

The final metaethical theory is constructivism.<sup>21</sup> Sharon Street and Christine Korsgaard will guide our more specific account.<sup>22</sup> The exploration of this theory will look different than the previous two. This is because constructivism breaks down into two separate views, Humean constructivism and Kantian constructivism. This split is essential in the way we understand the metaethical theory as a whole, and for that reason I will separate the two views almost immediately.

In a general sense, constructivism is the view that the moral facts are constructed through a *specific* process from the standpoint of a *specific* type of agent. (Bagnoli 2016) Since the moral facts come from an agent, constructivism is an agent dependent metaethical theory. However, it is not agent dependent in the same way that relativism is.<sup>23</sup> Recall that for relativists, there are no constraints on what the agents ought to look like. Relativists also believe the moral facts are

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<sup>21</sup>There are those who believe that constructivism is not a true metaethical guide as it can only provide guidance for ethical matters. This concern is refuted by Sharon Street in '*What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics*'.

Street, Sharon. "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?" *Philosophy Compass*, 2010: 363-384.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that I rely on Street for a general account of constructivism as well.

<sup>23</sup> Notice that this is reminiscent of the Buddhists and Jains who both derive knowledge from the same place, but that knowledge looks vastly different.

dependent on those agents because whether or not they apply is relative to the agent's moral agreements. (Baghramian and Carter 2016) For constructivists, agent dependency looks much different.

For starters, there are constraints on what the constructivist agents look like. (Bagnoli 2016) What exactly those constraints are will become important later on, but for now the importance is that there are certain constraints on agency. How the constructivist agent knows the moral facts is also different than how the relativist agent knows them. For relativists, the moral facts are applicable to a situation based on that agent's moral agreements. For constructivists, the moral facts are not dependent on agreements, but rather the moral facts are actually facts about what that agent values. (Street 2010) Additionally, those values are dependent on, and derived from, the agent's point of view of the world. (Street 2010, 371) Thus, the moral facts are 'constructed' through a process based on what that agent values, hence the name 'constructivism'.

Exactly what those agents look like, and how they construct the moral facts, vary depending on what type of constructivist you are. (Bagnoli 2013) As we did with realism earlier in the chapter, we will split constructivism into its separate views, Kantian and Humean constructivism. Sharon Street will lead our discussion of Humean constructivism, and Christine Korsgaard will take over for the Kantians. It is important to note that while the two views disagree about certain aspects of the metaethical theory, they agree on others; namely that the moral facts are constructed by some sort of agent dependent process. By the end of this exploration, we will have a comprehensive view of constructivism as a whole.

## ii. Humean Constructivism

We begin with an exploration of Humean constructivism led by Sharon Street. As we already know, constructivism is the view that the moral facts are constructed from the standpoint of a *specific* type of agent. (Bagnoli 2016) To be considered an agent in the eyes of a Humean, one must be ideally coherent. (Street 2010) This means that the agent's *actions*, in terms of the moral facts, must be logically derived from, and consistent with, their *beliefs* about the moral facts. For example, suppose I believe that 'you ought not kick puppies' is a moral fact. Given that I have this belief, I shouldn't go around kicking puppies. In fact, it would be logically inconsistent for me to kick puppies given such a belief. Humean constructivists also believe that those ideally coherent agents construct the moral facts through a *specific* process. This process is described by something called the practical standpoint characterization<sup>24</sup>, which explains that the moral facts are actually facts about what those agents value. (Street 2010) If we are to understand this process, then we need to address this notion of value.

For Humeans constructivists, when an agent judges a moral fact what they are actually doing is assessing whether or not that fact withstands some procedure of scrutiny. (Street 2010, 208) That means they judge it to be "good or bad, better or worse, required or optional, etc." when compared to something else. (Street 2010, 370) This gives rise to the Humean view that there can be no moral facts which exist independently of the agent's ability to value them. (Street 2010). Those values then represent the agent's evaluative standpoint. (Street 2010, 370)

This process is actually much more straightforward than it sounds. For example, recall the puppy kicking scenario. Suppose I want to know the moral permissibility of puppy kicking.

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<sup>24</sup> I am not using the typical 'proceduralist characterization'. Instead, I am using Sharon Street's practical standpoint characterization as it better captures the true nature of constructivism.

To do so, I would rely on my standpoint as an agent as well as my values. In order to know what I value I would have to compare puppy kicking to something else, say, petting puppies. I would then determine puppy kicking is ‘worse than’ puppy petting, which suggests I value not kicking puppies. From that I construct the moral fact is that ‘you ought not kick puppies.’

In short, Humean constructivism is the view that the moral facts are constructed based on what an ideally coherent agent values in a process characterized by their practical standpoint.

(Street 2010)

### **iii. Kantian Constructivism**

Now that we have explored the view of Humean constructivists, we can turn our attention to their Kantian counterparts. Christine Korsgaard will lead this discussion.

Since the Kantians are constructivists, they believe the moral facts are constructed through a specific process by a specific agent. However, for the Kantians, the process is not based on what the agent values, but rather on reason and rationality. (Bagnoli 2016) For Kantian agents, not only must the moral facts be consistent with and logically derived from their values, they must also be rational moral facts based on reason. (Bagnoli 2016) This directly contrasts the Humean constructivist’s definition of agency, where the only constraint is ideal coherency.

In order to understand the Kantian perspective, we must make sense of this rationality clause. For Kantian constructivists, to be rational is not just to behave in ways that make sense given the values I *actually* have. Instead, it is also to behave according to what values I *would* have if I were to take into account the agency of those around me. (Korsgaard 1996) To see how this works, consider you and your younger sibling are fighting over the last piece of cake. To solve the debate, your parents say that you get to cut the cake, but your sibling gets to choose

which piece they want. Now you are forced to consider what you want the cake to look like, given you do not know which piece you get. In a moral sense, you must take your brother's agency into account. Korsgaard argues that we must always take the agency of others into account, as we are bound by a universal law to respect agency. (Korsgaard 1996) In essence, given that I value my own humanity, by the rules of consistency, then I must also value yours. (Korsgaard 1996, 132). If I think my humanity is what makes my desires normative reasons, then your values are also normative reasons. (Korsgaard 1996, 133) It is worth noting that while it may seem rationality and coherency are intuitively the same concept, they are actually quite different. Kantians believe rationality, unlike ideal coherency, is an intrinsic human component. (Korsgaard 1996) For Kantians, the moral facts are not determined by what principles you, or I, or anyone else, *thinks* it would be rational to choose, but by which ones *are* rational to choose. (Rawls 2000)

The process by which the Kantian agents construct the moral facts is also different than their Humean counterparts. For the Humeans, the moral facts are constructed based on what we value. (Street 2010) However, for the Kantians the process is not based in value, it is rooted in reason and rationality. (Korsgaard 1996) Being able to identify the moral facts by what would be rational to accept, is meant to either capture moral 'rightness', or show moral wrongness by finding what would be disallowed by principles no one could reasonably reject. (Rawls 2000, 214) To see how this works, consider once more the puppy kicking example. We have seen from the Humeans that ideal coherency dictates the moral facts ought to stem logically from what we value, and that our actions ought to align with those values. (Street 2010) However, the Kantian's additional rationality clause means that when we construct a moral fact it also must be a rational one. For example, the moral fact that 'you ought not kick puppies' is rational. In

contrast the moral fact ‘you ought to kick puppies for pleasure’ is irrational, and if the agent derives such a fact, it is evidence something has gone wrong. (Bagnoli 2016)

In short, Kantian constructivism is the view that the moral facts are constructed by ideally coherent rational agents according to what reason dictates. The moral facts which the Kantian agents construct can be evaluated by rationality and reflective reasoning. (Korsgaard 1996) Furthermore, for Kantians, the moral facts are not determined by what principles you, or I, or anyone else, *thinks* it would be rational to choose, but by which ones *are* rational to choose.

#### **iv. Humean Critique of the Kantian**

Now that we have a general understanding of both Kantian and Humean constructivists, I believe it is important to explore exactly why the two theories come apart. To do this I will rely on Street’s comparison of the Kantian and Humean constructivists from her paper , *What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?*<sup>25</sup>

Street believes Kantian constructivism is an inadequate account of the constructivist view as it fails as a metaethical guide. (Rawls 2000, 219) Furthermore, while the Kantian constructivist may be able to account for the standpoint of their agent, they cannot justify grounding judgements in rationality, nor can they justify the correctness of their judgements. Humean constructivists pick up the Kantian pieces and put them in the correct order. (Street 2010) Unlike the Kantian constructivists, the Humean constructivists can ground the correctness of their judgements in how their agent constructs, and judges, the moral facts. This is because their stance can be checked against outside value judgements, those judgements against other outside judgements, and so on. (Street 2010) Furthermore, Humean constructivists argue the

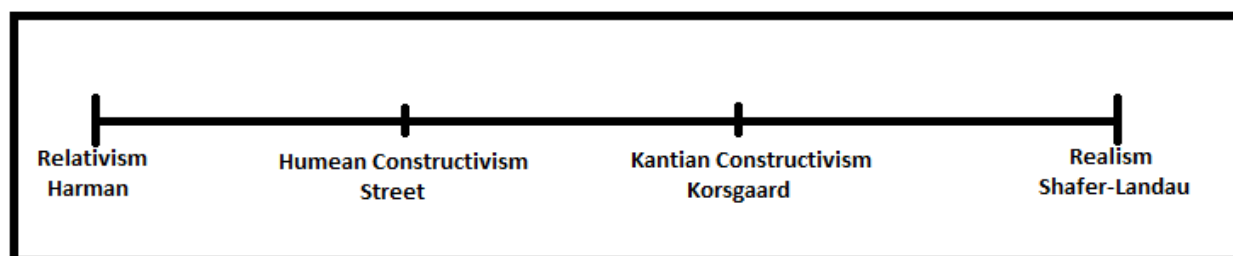
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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that while she uses the terms ‘restricted’ and ‘unrestricted’, she is actually referring to Kantian and Humean constructivism, just in different terms. She characterizes the Kantians as the restricted constructivists, and the Humeans as unrestricted constructivists.

Kantian agent can never be sure about what the moral facts are, and that is because they base their judgement on reason. Reason based judgements are problematic because those judgements cannot be checked against outside factors. Humeans avoid this problem given their practical standpoint, as they are able to judge the moral facts based on their values as well as outside values. (Street 2010)

#### v. How It All Fits Together

Now that we have an understanding of both forms of constructivism, we can map them on to the following scale.



**Figure Five – Metaethical Scale**

On the left side of the scale is most relative theory in terms of the treatment of the moral facts. Since relativists believe the moral facts are both agent and context dependent, they are the furthest to the left. As we move to the right side of the scale, the theories become more objective in of treatment of the moral facts. Since realists believe that the moral facts are both agent independent and objective, they are the furthest to the right. Both Humean and constructivists fall somewhere near the middle. The Kantian constructivists fall more on the right as there are more restrictions on agency and the process through which the agent constructs the moral facts. Since Humean constructivists lack such constraints, they fall more on the left side of the spectrum.



Before we wrap up our discussion of constructivism, there are two important objections that must be addressed. The first has to do with the Humeans and relativists, and the second with the Kantians and the realists.

Begin with the first objection. There are those who argue that given their proximity to the relativists, and their minimal constraints on agency, Humean constructivism is actually a form of relativism. Sharon Street and other Humeans would disagree. While both theories may be agent dependent, there are constraints which exist for Humean agents that, as we have seen, do not exist for the relativist agent. Exactly what those restrictions are we will soon find out, but the point now is that relativists have no constraints on agency, and the Humeans do. Furthermore, relativists also believe the moral facts are determined based on our moral agreements.

(Baghramian and Carter, *Relativism* 2016) Humean constructivists disagree, as they believe the agent is able to isolate the moral facts through a procedure of deduction based on what that agent *values*. (Street 2010, 367)

The second objection is similar to the first. There are those that argue given their proximity, and seemingly objective treatment of the moral facts, that Kantian constructivism is actually a form of realism. On a fundamental level, the core values of realism, namely that the moral facts are agent independent, conflict with the agent dependence of constructivism.

However, while there is no denying that the definitions of agency are different, there is still the question of objectivity. For both the realists and Kantian's, the moral facts are objective.

(Korsgaard 1996) However, they are not objective in the same manner.

When the realists say the moral facts are universal, they mean that the facts apply to all agents in all situations regardless of whether or not they endorse them. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

However for Kantians, like Korsgaard, the moral facts may be objective, but they apply to autonomous rational agents. (Korsgaard 1996, 94-98) If the moral facts were truly objective as the realists claim they are, that means they apply to everyone no matter what. If an agent does not believe in those moral facts, then they are wrong about what those facts are. Korsgaard would argue that this takes agent's reason and self-reflection out of the equation. They are simply wrong because they are mistaken about the moral facts. For Korsgaard, if she is wrong it is because she reasoned incorrectly, not because there is an objective moral truth she is mistaken about. The opportunity for self-reflection would rectify the problem and she would reach the moral fact eventually, by her own accord. (Korsgaard 1996) Thus, Kantian constructivism is inherently not realism because realism negates the nuances of reason.

#### **vi. Review**

In a general sense, constructivism is the view that the moral facts are constructed from the standpoint of a *specific* type of agent through a *specific* process. (Bagnoli 2016) The specifics of what the agent looks like, as well as the process through which they construct the moral facts, changes depending on what type of constructivist you are. For Humean constructivists like Sharon Street, there is only one stipulation for agency, and that is that the agent is ideally coherent. This means that the conclusions they reach about moral facts must stem logically, and without error, from their values. The agent uses those values to construct the moral facts through a process characterized by the practical standpoint. For Kantian constructivists, like Christine Korsgaard, the agent is ideally coherent and ideally rational. Given this particular starting point, the process by which the agent constructs the moral facts is based on what reason dictates. (Korsgaard 1996)

## V. Conclusion

We have explored three prominent and influential metaethical theories. Russ Shafer-Landau lead the discussion for realism, Gilbert Harman took over for the relativists, and Sharon Street and Christine Korsgaard shared the stage for constructivism. Our focus now turns to how we are supposed to choose which one gets us closest to a moral life. This, as it turns out, requires some work. In the next chapter, we will explore a set of guidelines that every metaethical theory ought to meet.

## **Chapter Two**

### **I. Introduction**

Chapter One served as a comprehensive study of three specific metaethical theories: realism, relativism, and constructivism. We explored each theory generally and in relation to specific philosophers: Russ Shafer-Landau, Gilbert Harman, Sharon Street, and Christine Korsgaard. Unlike Chapter One, which focuses on the theories themselves, Chapter Two takes a step back and evaluates how we are to know what a general metaethical theory ought to look like. This chapter argues that if we are to judge which theory gets us closest to a moral life, then we ought to have explicit guidelines to test them against.<sup>26</sup>

In order to do this, I propose, explore, and defend three unique guidelines, which I call the Appeals.<sup>27</sup> The Appeals are as follows: the Appeal to Knowledge, Appeal to Universality, and the Appeal to Intuition.<sup>28</sup> The Appeal to Knowledge claims that if there are moral facts, then we ought to be able to know them. The Appeal to Universality claims that a metaethical theory ought to apply to all agents equally, and hold them to the same moral standards. The final Appeal, the Appeal to Intuition, claims that a metaethical theory ought to be consistent with our moral intuitions.

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<sup>26</sup> Recall from the Introduction that a truly moral life is our goal.

<sup>27</sup> I will refer to these three appeals either individually by name, or collectively as the ‘Appeals’.

<sup>28</sup> I will give a more comprehensive explanation of them later, but for now just know that there are three of them and they will be in direct conversation with our three metaethical standpoints.

These Appeals are meant to isolate the core values of complex metaethical theories. Only when their core values are exposed can they be analyzed and compared to other metaethical theories. It is problematic if there are any discrepancies in the core values of a theory, as a house is only as strong as its foundation. Once we have established these three explicit guidelines, we will be able to test our three metaethical theories against them. Let us begin.

## **II. Justifying the Appeals**

Before we can begin discussing the Appeals, we must first defend where these guidelines come from, how we are justified in knowing them, and why they are a dependable source. To do this I will show they are intuitive, and exist independently of any preconceived notions about morality. Once this connection is established, it will be clear why we are justified in using them to analyze the three metaethical theories.

Momentarily set aside what we know about morality. More specifically, set aside any theoretical preconceptions about what a moral theory, life, or action ought to look like. Now consider the following two actions. The first action is kicking puppies for pleasure, and the second is petting puppies for pleasure. Even without theoretical preconceptions of morality, it still seems we would condemn certain actions and praise others. In regard to this particular puppy example, we intuitively condemn kicking puppies for pleasure, and intuitively praise petting them. Such intuitions stem from the former action seeming ‘bad’, or ‘wrong’, and the latter seeming ‘good’, or ‘right’. This instinctive differentiation between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ suggests two things. The first is that we have an intuitive sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that is not connected to any preconceived notion of morality. The second is that this ability relies on certain intuitive guidelines which we use to determine what actions or beliefs are ‘right’, and which actions or beliefs are ‘wrong’.

In the same way we have an intuitive ability to determine which actions or beliefs are ‘right’, and which actions or beliefs are ‘wrong’, we can also determine where information about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ought to come from. To see how this is possible, consider the following. Suppose I am interested in pursuing ‘the good life,’ but know nothing about what a good life looks like. Given my ignorance, it seems reasonable to seek guidance from a life coach.<sup>29</sup> Now, suppose I have two options for a life coach. Option number one is Mister Rabbit, a rabbit, and option number two is Mister Tyrant, a tyrant. How am I going to choose between them? At first glance I am not immediately inclined to choose either. Mister Rabbit and Mister Tyrant both seem like poor options, albeit for different reasons. Choosing the first option, Mister Rabbit, seems unwise as he is a rabbit and I am not. While he may have the faculties to capture ‘the good life’ of rabbits and other rabbit-y creatures, he lacks the faculties to capture my needs as a human. Thus, it seems that given my status as a human, ‘the good life’ I am after demands more than what a rabbit can capture. Therefore, I would not choose Mister Rabbit as a life coach. Unfortunately, my second option, Mister Tyrant, is also a poor choice for a life coach. Mister Tyrant may be human and thus possess the faculties Mister Rabbit lacked, but his human status does not mean he is capable of providing the guidance I am after. This is because Mister Tyrant seems to be the wrong kind of human, namely a tyrant. A tyrant, by definition is ‘anyone who exercises power or authority oppressively, despotically, or cruelly, and acts in a cruel, violent, or wicked manner’.<sup>30</sup> That is, someone who is set up to go against intuitive notions of right and wrong. Guidance given from the standpoint of someone whose core values are synonymous with

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<sup>29</sup> When you ask the average person where the information for living ‘the good life’ comes from, the common response is ‘God’. However, since I am concerned with secular knowledge about morality, my focus is on nonspiritual solutions.

<sup>30</sup> "tyrant, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 21 March 2016

‘the bad’ cannot be trusted to get you to a life of ‘the good’. Given this, Mister Tyrant, like Mister Rabbit, would be a poor option for a life coach.

Through both the life coach and puppy kicking examples, we are able to see how even without preconceived theories of morality or what a moral guide ought to look like; we are able to differentiate between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and thus determine what a moral guide ought to look like. Those particular intuitions give rise to the notion that we *do* have these intuitive guidelines we use to determine what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’.

#### **i. Caution: Unstable Terrain**

Now that we have seen intuitive guidelines exist, we must now justify why we can use them to assess the metaethical theories. We know that metaethics takes a primary approach to ethics and looks at the precursors to moral actions. What we are doing is taking a primary approach to metaethics, and looking at the precursors to where moral guidance comes from. This is philosophy at its highest level of abstraction. I like to call it ‘meta-metaethics’.

Due to this advanced level of abstraction, an argument in favor of the Appeals is tricky and focuses mainly on what cannot be done. For example, they are not something that exist in the literature, and thus cannot be based in established views of influential philosophers. While these Appeals are unique, I am not suggesting that they are novel concepts. However, they have not been specifically identified or presented in this manner.<sup>31</sup> Instead, they have been portrayed as mainly theoretical ideologies without being directly identified or expressed. Due to this, I cannot provide polished, indisputable versions of the Appeals. They are in their infantile stage

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<sup>31</sup> To the best of my knowledge

and require thought and research which I am unqualified to provide. Furthermore, I cannot attest that they apply to all metaethical theories in all instances for a similar reason.

On the other hand, what I can do, and am more than qualified to handle, is justify the Appeals by basing them in three roughly indisputable concepts. Those three conceptions are simplicity, internal coherence, and common sense. Once we see how the Appeals are entrenched in these particular concepts, we can be confident that they are an appropriate way in which to analyze metaethical theories.

## **ii. Simplicity**

To motivate the Appeals quest for simplicity, consider the following example of the great solar system debate of Ptolemy and Galileo. Ptolemy, a roman astronomer from about 100 AD, set out to explain the movement of the solar system. He, like many greats before him, believed the earth was at the center, and that the heavenly bodies rotated around it in concentric loops. However, in order to accommodate for peculiar movements of particular planets, namely the ones that seemed to go backwards and then forwards again, Ptolemy proposed the planets had highly complex orbits. Their paths around the earth were circular, but within that circle there were loops, loops within those loops, and so on. His complex system of looping orbits accounted for the peculiarities in the movement of the planets, and this model remained unchallenged for roughly 1,500 years. Then Galileo came along. He noticed that the looping orbits failed to account for every observable peculiarity, and set out to fix it. Unlike Ptolemy, Galileo did not attempt to fix the model by adding more loops, but rather by simplifying it. He removed the complex system of loops and returned the orbits to simple concentric circles. Then, he changed the order of the planets so the sun was at the center. With this new model, Galileo was not only



able to capture every peculiarity that Ptolemy could not, but did so in a simple and straightforward manner. Galileo's model has remained unchallenged ever since.

To understand why the simpler model was more favorable, beyond being more accurate, we rely on the argument from Occam's razor. This argument, as explained by Richard Swinburne, states that all things being equal, a simple hypothesis is preferable to a complex one for three reasons. The first is that the simplest hypotheses used to explain a phenomenon is the most likely to be true. The second reason is that its predictions are more likely to be true. The final reason is that it is an *a priori* epistemic principle that simplicity is evidence of truth. (Swinburne 1997, 1) It is important to note that while the Appeals are meant to target simplicity, there are times in which a more complex theory may be preferred. For example, if evidence showed that Ptolemy's looping orbit model was more accurate than Galileo's simple model, then we would follow Ptolemy's model despite the complexity. However, the take away here is that if we stray from simplicity we ought to have a good reason to do so.

### **iii. Internal Coherence**

Beyond appealing to simplicity, the Appeals also target internal consistency. To see why this is important, consider the Principle of Non-Contradiction. We understand metaethical theories are made up of sentences. Those sentences can either be true or false. If it is a consistent theory, then that means none of those sentences contradict each other. However, if it is inconsistent, that means some sentences contradict other sentences. If these contradictions happen, then not all of the theory can be true. Thus, an inconsistent metaethical theory is made up of one or more false statements.

Following an inconsistent moral guide would seem like an unwise decision. Generally speaking when inconsistencies are identified, people tend to avoid, or ultimately reject, the inconsistent theory. For example, there is an apparent contradiction between gravity and quantum mechanics, which has caused enormous consternation in the physics community. There is an inconsistency in the way the laws govern energy at the subatomic level, and how they govern energy at the non-subatomic level. This seems to be a tension in the theory, and bothers a lot of physicists. This is because we are able to intuitively recognize that inconsistency is bad, and that inconsistent theories are flawed in some way.

#### **iv. Common Sense**

Finally, the Appeals target common sense. More specifically, they target common sense in terms of our moral intuitions. This is particularly important as we rely on common sense to gather information about moral matters. It also gives us a way to trust the information we gather. To see how this is so, contrast moral matters with scientific matters. In the sciences, when we want to investigate something, there are many things we rely on to gather information. We do field work, run tests, and gather evidence to draw conclusions. In essence, we trust what the evidence tells us. What about for moral matters? Since morality is not science, we cannot rely on quantitative datamining to draw conclusions. For moral matters we trust in what common sense tells us, as opposed to trusting quantitative evidence.

To see how this is so, consider the following two theories. Suppose the first is a metaethical theory which states that anything which makes Madonna happy will bring us closer to a life of morality. Suppose the second theory tells us that the property of being good is identical to the property of being a large cheesy pizza. These theories immediately seem absurd. Why? Well, that is because they are not in line with what common sense dictates is a good

theory. We saw this when we were presented with Mister Rabbit and Mister Tyrant as options for a life coach. Recall that both options seemed problematic, as both went against what common sense dictates.

There are those who may argue that appealing to common sense is unimportant and beyond the scope of this thesis. I disagree. If we cannot rely on common sense, then what do we rely on when theorizing about morality? It seems to be the only thing we can rely on. Even in the non-moral realm, if something goes against what common sense dictates it better have a good reason to do so. If not, then it triggers a red flag. The same thing ought to apply to the moral realm as well. If a metaethical theory strays from common sense, it ought to have a good reason to do so.

#### **v. Construction of the Appeals**

There remains one final aspect to explore before I present the Appeals, and that is to comment on how they were constructed. First I will explain how these guidelines were developed. I began by studying the three specific metaethical theories, realism, relativism, and constructivism. I took note of the essential elements of each theory, and paid special attention to the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ aspects of each theory, as well as what they had in common. With this, I was able to identify the key elements of metaethical theories in general, as well as the key elements to each theory. Once I had these elements, the task shifted to constructing the Appeals. The goal of the Appeals is to identify precisely where each theory gets it right, and where they go wrong. There is no denying that each metaethical theory has its strengths and weaknesses, but the goal is to isolate the theory with the least weak points. I was careful to phrase each Appeal so that it did not target a particular theory, but rather gave each one an equal opportunity to respond to the guideline. Now that we have covered where these Appeals come from, how we can be

justified in relying on them for guidance, and how they were constructed, we may move to a more direct discussion. Let us begin.

### **III. The Appeals**

#### **i. Appeal to Knowledge**

The first guideline is the Appeal to Knowledge. This appeal entails that moral knowledge is possible. Regardless of what the source of morality is, we should be able to know things about it. To see why this should be an appeal, consider the following argument from common sense and consistency. If a metaethical theory is meant to show where moral guidance stems from, then it ought to entail that knowledge about moral matters is possible. It would be inconsistent for a theory to claim to know both where moral guidance stems from, and claim moral knowledge is impossible. Furthermore, a theory would also not be considered internally coherent if it committed to there being moral facts, but also committed to knowledge of such facts being impossible. Beyond meeting the consistency and coherency conditions, the Appeal to Knowledge also meets the simplicity condition. Suppose there are moral facts, but knowledge of them is impossible. If this were the case, then any moral act would either be impossible to justify, or its justification would be reminiscent of Ptolemy's complex loops. Beyond appealing to common sense, consistency, and simplicity, the Appeal to Knowledge is essential to counter those who believe moral knowledge is impossible, namely the moral skeptics.

#### **ii. Appeal to Universality**

The second guideline is the Appeal to Universality. This appeal entails that any metaethical theory ought to be universal. A metaethical theory ought to apply to everyone equally, regardless of personal or cultural qualms. A theory which does not hold its agents to the same standards would be inconsistent. To see how this is so, consider a world in which

metaethical theories do not apply to everyone equally. This means each agent may have their own metaethical guide. Charlie's moral facts could be constrained by the contracts he enters into, Oliver's moral facts to be constrained by God, Johnny's by rationality, and so forth. If a metaethical theory was not universal, then the agents would be following whatever guide they pleased, and one could only imagine how complex this would become. According to our appeal to simplicity, that means it must be wrong. Furthermore, were everyone to follow their own metaethical guide, it would be nearly impossible to scan each individual guide for internal consistency.

### **iii. Appeal to Intuition**

The third, and final, guideline is the Appeal to Intuition. This appeal entails that any metaethical theory should provide guidance that is consistent with our moral intuitions. It is important to note that while it seems that this appeal requires us to step out of the metaethical realm and into the ethical one, that notion is misleading. Recall the puppy kicking example from the beginning of this chapter. Say that Charlie's guide does not condone puppy kicking, and Oliver's guide does. This divide is important for two reasons. The first is that if our metaethical guide does not condemn puppy kicking, something has gone wrong. We have we have already intuitively identified puppy kicking is something synonymous with the 'bad'. If a metaethical theory does not condone something that is intuitively 'bad', then this discrepancy suggests it is not a good metaethical theory. The second reason this discrepancy between Charlie and Oliver is important is because the men are having a moral disagreement. Moral disagreements are not like disagreements about matters of personal preference. They are not like disagreements about favorite flavors of ice cream, but rather disagreements about moral facts, like the permissibility of puppy kicking, or causing unnecessary pain.

The Appeal to Intuition appeals to common sense, as any metaethical theory which goes against our moral intuitions must not be a good metaethical theory. Furthermore, it also appeals to consistency. If a metaethical theory preaches ‘the good’ but results in allowing for ‘the bad’ actions, then it is an inconsistent theory. In terms of appealing to simplicity, I am not quite sure that argument works here. The focus of this appeal is less on simplicity, and more on internal coherence and appealing to our common sense as agents.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Now that we have an understanding of what a good metaethical theory ought to look like, we can apply these Appeals to our theories of interest. The aim of this thesis is to decide which theory, out of constructivism, relativism, and realism, is the best metaethical guide.

## **Chapter Three**

### **I. Introduction**

Chapter One served as an exploration of three metaethical theories, realism, relativism, and constructivism. We looked at those theories in general and in relation to specific philosophers, namely Russ Shafer-Landau, Gilbert Harman, Sharon Street, and Christine Korsgaard. Chapter Two gave us a way to analyze those theories by providing three essential guidelines. Those guidelines, the Appeals, are the Appeal to Knowledge, Appeal to Universality, and the Appeal to Intuition. Chapter Three, the final chapter, will run those theories through the guidelines. To do so, I will go appeal by appeal and apply them to the theories. Once all three theories have gone through the Appeal, I will give a brief recap of how each one fares. By the end of this chapter, we will see which theories, if any, meet the criteria of a good metaethical theory.

Before we launch into the analysis of the theories by the Appeals, let us first revisit the theories and Appeals themselves.

Begin with the theories. Realism, as guided by Russ Shafer-Landau, is the theory that there are objective moral facts that exist independently of our standpoint as agents. These agent independent facts are universal and apply to everyone regardless of whether or not they endorse them. (Shafer-Landau 2004, 62) The objectivity clause of these agent independent moral facts

leads to a split in the realists in terms of how we are to know them. For the naturalist realists, we experience and know these moral facts in the same way we experience and know natural facts, like gravity. (Ridge 2014) The moral facts are features of the natural world in the same way the natural facts are features of the natural world. (Ridge 2014) For the non-naturalist realist, we know the moral facts the same way we know the mathematical facts, like any number multiplied by zero is zero. These mathematical facts are not like the natural facts, just as the moral facts are not like the natural facts. For non-naturalists like Shafer-Landau, the notion that a non-naturalist can never be certain what the moral facts are is not a problem, as there are many things we consider factual but are uncertain about. This is possible because knowledge does not require certainty. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

The next theory is relativism. Relativism, as told by Harman, is the view that there are context and agent dependent moral facts. (Baghramian and Carter 2016) For relativists, there is no doubt that there are moral facts. However, whether those facts apply to a certain situation depends on whatever contractual agreements the agent has entered into. If someone disagrees with our moral values it is not because there is something wrong with them. They are neither irrational, nor ignorant of the facts; they simply have different moral values. (Harman 2010, 59) Also recall that despite being an agent dependent theory, the relativist does not impose constraints on what an agent ought to look like.

The final theory is constructivism. Constructivism, as told by Sharon Street and Christine Korsgaard, is the view that the moral facts are known and constructed through a specific process from the standpoint of a specific type of agent. (Bagnoli 2016) What that agent looks like, and the process by which they construct the moral facts changes depending on what type of constructivist you are. For Humean constructivists like Sharon Street, the key to agency is ideal



coherency. Furthermore, the process through which the agent constructs the moral facts is called the practical standpoint characterization. This characterization constructs the moral facts off of what the agent inherently values. However, for Kantian constructivists like Korsgaard, things look much different. To be considered an agent, one must not only be ideally coherent, but rational as well. This means that not only must one's actions logically stem from, and be consistent with, their beliefs, but the beliefs themselves must stem from the viewpoint of a rational agent. (Bagnoli 2016) How that particular agent constructs the moral facts is also different, and is not based on what the agent values, but on reason. For Kantians reason and rationality are key components because they are the essence of humanity. (Korsgaard 1996)

Given this recap of realism, relativism, and constructivism, we turn our attention to a recap of the three Appeals. The first appeal, the Appeal to Knowledge, states that if there are moral facts, then they ought to be knowable. The second appeal, the Appeal to Universality, states that any metaethical theory ought to apply equally to all agents. The final Appeal, the Appeal to Intuition, states that any metaethical theory ought to be consistent with our moral intuitions. We have also seen that we are justified in using these Appeals to test the theories because they target simplicity, internal coherence, and common sense.

Now that we have a recap of the three metaethical theories, and the Appeals we will test them against, we can proceed with our analysis. For the sake of organization, I will always follow the same pattern. I will begin by identifying the Appeal, and then present both forms of realism. Then, I will move to relativism, and finally present both forms of constructivism. At the end of each Appeal I will give a list of which theories meet the guideline, and which do not. It is worth noting that the theories which break down into two views, the realists and constructivists, may or may not come apart when they meet the Appeals. In the cases where each view has a

different response we will address each one individually. In the cases where they would have the same response, I will combine them. Let us begin.

## II. Round One – Appeal to Knowledge

The Appeal to Knowledge is up first. Recall that this Appeal states that moral facts ought to be knowable.

### i. Realism

Begin with realism. For this Appeal, I will present a response on behalf of both the naturalist and non-naturalist realist. Given realism's commitment to agent independent moral facts, it is difficult to see how knowledge of the moral facts is possible. Thus, the burden falls heavily upon the realist to explain how moral facts can be both agent independent and knowable. This, as it turns out, requires some work if they are to pass this Appeal.

We begin by looking at how the realist's commitment to agent independence could be problematic. Recall from our exploration of realism in Chapter One that their commitment to objective, agent dependent moral facts opens the door to the moral skeptic. Moral skeptics believe that since we do not have any factual evidence moral facts exist, then we are unjustified in believing in those facts. Furthermore, since we can never know what the moral facts are, we are also unjustified in deriving any sort of guidance from them. In short, moral knowledge is unlikely for agent independent theories because whatever knowledge they provide is unjustifiable. Thus, the moral skeptic would argue realism fails the Appeal to Knowledge. However, the naturalist and non-naturalists would disagree, as both forms believe that moral knowledge *is* possible.

First consider a response on behalf of the naturalist realist. For the naturalist, knowledge of the moral facts is not a problem, because they are facets of the world just like the natural facts are. (Ridge 2014) Like the moral facts, the natural facts are also agent independent, and yet we claim to have knowledge of them. The naturalist would argue that we will come to know the moral facts in the same way we came to know the natural facts.

To see how this is so, consider how we thought the world worked roughly a century ago. There were plenty of things we did not know about that are now considered common knowledge. For example, before we had any idea about the fact of gravity, we knew there was something there. Apples fell from trees, rocks rolled downhill, and humans fell down. Before Newton, we did not have any factual evidence of what was happening in these cases. However, what we did have were our suspicions and intuitions. Just because gravity was intangible and immaterial did not mean it did not exist. Realists argue that their view functions in a similar manner. We cannot disregard moral facts simply because we have yet to stumble upon the philosophical equivalent of the Newtonian revolution.

Unfortunately the burden of explaining how we have moral knowledge falls heaviest on the non-naturalist realists. In response to the skeptic, the non-naturalist would acknowledge that we do not have knowledge of the moral facts in the way we have knowledge of the natural facts. (Ridge 2014) This is because moral facts are not facets of the natural world in the way the natural facts are. Instead, our knowledge of the moral facts more accurately resembles our knowledge of mathematical facts. Like the moral facts, mathematical facts, or modal truths, are theoretic. Furthermore, there are also highly debated mathematical facts which we claim to know. For example, if you ask a mathematician whether parallel lines converge, you will get the

same answer – no.<sup>32</sup> However, there are lots of conjectures that are unproven but logicians agree we know. Goldbach's conjecture is a prime example. Just because we cannot interact with, nor spatially observe the moral facts, does not mean we cannot know them. If this were the case we would also be unjustified in our knowledge of mathematical facts. Since this is considered an absurd idea in the mathematical realm, the naturalist would argue that it is also an absurd idea in the moral realm.

Both the naturalist realists and non-naturalist realists seem to offer compelling responses to both the skeptic and the Appeal to Knowledge. We cannot discount the naturalist realist simply because moral facts do not come from us. Perhaps we ought to do what we did with the natural facts and rely on our suspicions and intuitions to guide our knowledge of these facts. For this reason I am compelled to believe the naturalists pass the Appeal to Knowledge. We also cannot discount the non-naturalist realist because the moral facts are not observable in the way natural facts are. If we claim to have knowledge of the modal truths, that is the mathematical facts, we must also claim to have knowledge of the moral facts. For this reason I am compelled to believe the non-naturalists pass the Appeal to Knowledge.

## **ii. Relativism**

Next, consider relativism. Relativism entails the moral facts are dependent on the standpoint of an agent. The relativists do not seem to fall victim to the same criticisms the realists do. This is because relativism is agent dependent. For these sources, knowledge of the moral facts is justifiable. (Sinnott-Armstrong 2015) If morality comes from us, then we know what the facts are, where they came from, and have reason to believe they are the moral facts based on our status as agents. In short, there is a direct connection between us and the moral

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<sup>32</sup> At least in a Euclidian world.

facts, thus our knowledge of them is implied. It would be illogical that the agent would not have knowledge of something that is dependent on the very nature of them being an agent.

Furthermore, relativism is dependent upon the agent's ability to contextually identify and apply the appropriate moral fact. This process would be nearly impossible if the agent were unable to know the moral facts.<sup>33</sup> Thus, relativism passes the appeal.

### iii. Constructivism

Finally, consider constructivism. There is no difference between the way Humean and Kantian constructivists move through this appeal, and thus I will treat them as one. This is a rather short response, as it is very similar to the one given by the relativist. Given that constructivism, like relativism, is agent dependent, then the moral facts ought to be knowable. If the moral facts are constructed from a specific process given the standpoint of a specific type of agent, then they must be knowable by that agent. It would be contradictory for the moral facts to be derived from an agent, but then not known by that agent. Thus, both Humean and Kantian versions of constructivism pass the Appeal to Knowledge.

### iv. Results

The results from the Appeal to Knowledge are as follows.

<u>Appeal</u>	<u>Metaethical Theory</u>	<u>Pass?</u>
Knowledge	Realism	Naturalist - ✓ Non-Naturalist - ✓
Knowledge	Relativism	Relativist ✓
Knowledge	Constructivism	Kantian - ✓ Humean - ✓

**Figure Six – Appeal to Knowledge Results**

<sup>33</sup> Or at the very least require an explanation on behalf of the relativist.

### **III. Round Two – Appeal to Universality**

The second appeal is the Appeal to Universality. This Appeal states that a metaethical theory should be equally as applicable to everyone, and hold its agents to the same moral standards.

#### **i. Realism**

Begin with realism. I will not give a separate response on behalf of the naturalist and non-naturalist, as they have the same response to this Appeal.

Recall from our discussion of realism in Chapter One that the realists are dependent on objective moral facts. (Sayre-McCord 2015) If there are such moral facts, then they must apply to everyone simply by their nature of being objective. The moral facts must apply to everyone regardless of the circumstances or whether they choose to abide by them or not. (Shafer-Landau 2004) Recall the parallel world example from Chapter One. Charlie and Oliver are both agents in World One, and there is a moral fact that says you ought not lie. This fact applies to everyone regardless of the circumstances. It would be wrong to lie if Charlie wanted to lie, if both Charlie and Oliver wanted to lie, or if the entirety of World One wanted to lie. Since realists endorse objective moral facts, they pass the Appeal to Universality.

#### **ii. Relativism**

Now consider relativism. Recall from our discussion in Chapter One that the relativists are committed to context and agent dependent moral facts. (Baghramian and Carter 2016) For frame of reference relativists like Harman, the moral facts are determined by the agent relative to the implicit agreement they have entered into, as well as to what that agent believes.

Since there are neither internal standards, like those that would regulate what that agent ought to look like, nor external standards, like objectivity, there is no way to hold all agents to the same standard. Since the moral outcome an agent reaches is contingent on context, is no way to universalize the theory. If the theory is not universal, then it fails this second Appeal. If a theory is not universal, that means it does not hold all of its agents to the same standards.

While not being universal may not seem like a serious problem, it has the potential for some particularly unpleasant outcomes. To see why this is the case, consider the Parallel World example from Chapter One, and focus on World Two. In this world, Charlie and Oliver follow different moral facts. There is a moral fact sub-Oliver that you ought not lie, and a moral fact sub-Charlie that you ought to lie. This allows Charlie and Oliver to behave in opposite ways. They are also justified in doing so as long as their actions follow their moral beliefs. While this may not seem inherently problematic, consider the following situation. Charlie and Oliver are baking peanut butter cookies. A little boy approaches them and asks if he can have a cookie. The little boy tells Charlie and Oliver that he has a severe peanut allergy so he cannot have one if they are peanut butter cookies. Charlie, who believes he should lie, tells the little boy he can have a cookie. Oliver, who believes that you ought not lie, tells the boy he cannot have one. The little boy, true to the nature of being a little boy, believes Charlie and takes a cookie.

What does this scenario say about relativism, given that both Charlie and Oliver are relativists? If the two men follow the same metaethical theory, wouldn't they both be inclined to tell the boy the truth that there were peanuts in the cookies? It seems that by following his belief, and lying to the boy, Charlie has caused him harm. In contrast, Oliver, obeying his belief that you should never lie, did not harm the little boy. This seems strange considering both men follow the same metaethical guide, and thus should be held to the same standards. However, since

relativism depends on agent and context dependent moral facts there is nothing it can do to keep Charlie from lying and harming the little boy.

Since there are no objective moral facts, or constraints on what the agent ought to look like, relativism cannot hold all its agents to the same standards. Due to this, relativism cannot be universal and thus fails the Appeal to Universality.

Before we move to constructivism, let us first outline where we stand. The realists passed the Appeal to Universality because of their commitment to objective, agent independent moral facts. Once the moral facts are identified, it does not matter what the agents believe, or what the situation is, the moral facts apply to everyone all the time. Furthermore, since realism is agent independent, what the agent looks like does not matter. Everyone, from sadists to humanitarians, is held to the same moral standards. In contrast, the relativists failed to Appeal to Universality because of their commitment to context and agent dependent moral facts. Since there is no way to regulate either what the moral facts are, or what the agent ought to look like, then there is no way to hold all agents to the same moral standards. There is no way to regulate the sadists acting in accordance with their beliefs, and the humanitarians acting in accordance with their beliefs. As we will soon discover, since the constructivists fall in-between these two extremes, it is not clear whether or not they pass this Appeal.

### **iii. Constructivism**

Finally consider the constructivists. Recall that for both forms of constructivism, the moral facts are ‘constructed’ from the standpoint of a specific type of agent. How that agent is defined varies depending on whether you are a Humean or Kantian constructivist. I will provide a response to this Appeal on behalf of both the Humean and Kantian constructivists.



Begin with the Kantian constructivists, and recall the exploration of the theory from Chapter One. While the Kantians may not be committed to objective moral facts, they are committed to facts that act in a similar manner. We have seen that for Kantians, the moral facts they recognize are constructed by a rational agent and based in reason. (Bagnoli 2016) Since this metaethical theory is dependent on such a specific form of agent, it does not fall victim to this Appeal in the same way that relativism does. To see how this is the case, recall the case of the peanut butter cookie. If both Charlie and Oliver were rational agents who constructed the moral facts through a process rooted in reason, then the little boy would not have gotten the cookie. That is because a truly reasonable and rational agent never would have given a peanut butter cookie to a child with a peanut allergy. It is illogical and irrational, and thus never would have happened. Due to the constraints on what an agent ought to look like, if a potential agent does not meet the criteria, they are not considered agents until they do. This is because rationality and reason are essential components of humanity. (Korsgaard 1996) Kantian constructivism is universal, albeit not in a conventional sense. The metaethical theory applies equally to all agents and non-agents, and holds all of its agents to the same standards of rationality and reason. The theories strict definition of agency saves it from failing the Appeal to Universality.

Now consider the Humean constructivists, and recall the exploration of the theory from Chapter One. For Humean constructivism, the moral facts are constructed from the standpoint of a very specific type of agent. This agent's actions must follow, logically and without any discrepancies, from the agent's beliefs. (Street 2010) Unlike the Kantians, there is no rationality clause, or restriction beyond coherency and, ultimately, consistency.

To see why this lack of restriction is potentially problematic, consider Sharon Street's infamous Caligula<sup>34</sup> argument. (Street 2010, 375-377) Street argues that if Caligula were to reason from his starting point that it was sensible to torture children, and then proceeds to torture children, he has in fact done nothing wrong. There is no logical fallacy between what Caligula believes is right, and his actions. Therefore, Humean constructivists do not believe that he is making any mistake from what logically follows from his standpoint. Now, put that into the context of the cookie example and consider once more the case Charlie and Oliver. If Charlie's actions - lying to the boy - stem logically from, and are consistent with his beliefs - you ought to lie - then he is justified in lying to the boy. The same goes for Oliver. If his actions - not lying to the boy - stem logically from, and are consistent with his beliefs - you ought not lie - then he is justified in not lying to the boy. This seems strange.

Humean constructivism may be universal in the sense that it applies to all of its agents. However it, like relativism, does not hold all its agents to the same moral standards. Since there is no set standard to apply to everyone, like rationality for Kantian constructivism, Humean constructivism cannot be universal. For this reason, the Humean constructivist fails the Appeal to Universality.<sup>35</sup>

#### **iv. Results**

Now that all three theories have been run through the second Appeal to Universality, the results are as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> Street uses Caligula, the historical figure, for her example.

<sup>35</sup> Street may argue that Humean constructivism would pass because being able to justify an ideally coherent Caligula is not a problem for her theory. We will return to this idea later in the conclusion.

<u>Appeal</u>	<u>Metaethical Theory</u>	<u>Pass?</u>
Universality	Realism	Naturalist - ✓ Non-Naturalist - ✓
Universality	Relativism	Relativist ✗
Universality	Constructivism	Kantian - ✓ Humean - ✗

**Figure Seven – Appeal to Universality**

#### **IV. Round Three – Appeal to Intuition**

The final guideline is the Appeal to Intuition, which states that a metaethical theory should be consistent with our moral intuitions. This Appeal will be structured a little different than the others. If we are to judge whether the theories produce anything inconsistent with our moral intuitions, we must first identify a basic moral intuition, namely that moral disagreements are important.

To see how this is an intuition, consider the following abortion example. You are pro-choice, that is you believe abortion is always permissible, and I am pro-life, that is I believe abortion is always impermissible. It is clear that you and I disagree over the permissibility of abortion. More specifically, this is fundamentally a disagreement over the morality of abortion. Given the nature of our disagreement, it seems inherently different than a disagreement over matters of taste or perspective. If you and I disagree over the best flavor of ice-cream, or whether the car we are in is going faster than the speed limit, we are simply disagreeing over superficial matters. However, moral disagreements, such as the morality of abortion, seem much more important. Since abortion is a moral matter, there seems to be more pressure on us to know the answer. Our disagreement is important as it helps identify what moral questions still need answering. If a metaethical theory entails that moral disagreements are either unimportant, or

irrelevant, this seems to go against a basic intuition, and this, as we have already identified in Chapter Two, is problematic. Let us begin.

### **i. Realism**

Begin with realism. I will not make a distinction between the naturalist and non-naturalist realists, as that distinction is irrelevant to this particular Appeal

Recall from our exploration from Chapter One that once a realist identifies the moral fact, they are committed to that fact regardless of internal or external influences. This means that there could be pro-life and pro-choice realists. Once a realist identifies the moral fact, be it either option, then they are committed to that fact regardless of the circumstances. If a pro-life realist were to meet a pro-choice realist, they would recognize they are having a disagreement over the morality of abortion. However, for realists, such disagreements are insignificant. Realists believe that moral disagreements are no different than disagreements over matters of taste or perspective. They tell us nothing about the moral facts themselves, nor can we learn anything from them. (Shafer-Landau 2004)

Realists, and particularly Shafer-Landau, believe moral disagreements are no different than other forms of disagreement, and are thus unimportant. This belief goes against an intuition we identified earlier, namely that moral disagreements are important and tell us something about morality. Since realism goes against a basic moral intuition, it fails the third Appeal.

### **ii. Relativism**

Now consider relativism. If a pro-choice relativist were to meet a pro-life relativist, they would identify they were having a disagreement. This sort of moral disagreement between relativists is 'important', as moral disagreements tell us something about the nature of morality.

(Harman 2012) At first glance it seems as if relativists agree that moral disagreements are important due to them being over moral matters, however this can be misleading. For the relativists, when you and I disagree over the permissibility of abortion, we are not having a moral disagreement. The type of disagreement we are actually having is one contingent upon perspective. To see how this is the case, consider the following example. I watch you drive by and ask you how fast you are driving, and you tell me 60 mph. Given that my perspective is from earth, then I would agree that you are driving 60 mph. However, if my perspective were, say, from the moon, I would disagree. That is because you would be driving much faster than 60 mph given the rotational speed of the earth. For relativists, moral disagreements may be important, but not because they tell us anything about morality itself. They are important because they provide insight into differences in perspective.

Regardless of relativists claiming that moral disagreements are ‘important’, this still seems to conflict with our moral intuitions. If you and I are disagreeing about the permissibility of abortions, it seems as if the discussion we are having is much heavier than something that can be explained by a difference in perspective. We are disagreeing about the permissibility of ending a human life, not perspective, and that in itself is valuable. Since intuition tells us that moral disagreement is inherently important, and the relativists do not share this view, they fail the Appeal to Intuition.

### **iii. Constructivism**

Finally, consider constructivism. For this appeal, we must break constructivism into its two forms, Humean and Kantian.

Begin with Humean constructivism. This passage is short as the Humean constructivists meet the same fate as the relativists, and for similar reasons. Imagine that two agents are sitting at a table discussing the morality of abortion; one is pro-choice, and one pro-life. Both agents have arrived at this belief logically, and without error, from the moral fact they have constructed based on their standpoints as agents. While they may recognize that their disagreement is moral in nature, they, like the relativists, would see it actually as a disagreement based on perspective. Given that both agents are ideally coherent, and their stance on abortion is derived logically and without error from the moral facts they have constructed, then there is nothing about this disagreement that is inherently important. The two agents take nothing away from the disagreement beyond them having conflicting moral beliefs. For this reason, which happens to be reminiscent of the relativists, the Humean constructivists fail the Appeal to Intuition.

Finally consider the Kantian Constructivists. Imagine once more that there are two agents sitting at a table discussing the permissibility of abortion. One is pro-choice, and the other is pro-life. Unlike the theories before, this disagreement would be disturbing. Both agents recognize that their disagreement is moral in nature; however there are also further implications. Since Kantian constructivists construct the moral facts through a rational process based in reason, if two agents disagree, this suggests something has gone wrong. This disagreement tells us that one, or both, of them is either irrational or inconsistent, and thus not the proper type of agent. This type of disagreement leading to self-reflection is important. This is because Kantian constructivists believe in an intense connection between rationality and morality. (Korsgaard 1996) If they did not, rationality would not be a required component in a truly moral agent.

Since the Kantian constructivists believe moral disagreements are important by nature of being based in morality, they do not go against a basic moral intuition. Thus, the Kantian constructivists pass the Appeal to Intuition.

#### iv. Results

Now that we have run the three theories through the final Appeal to Intuition, the results are as follows:

<u>Appeal</u>	<u>Metaethical Theory</u>	<u>Pass?</u>
Intuition	Realism	Naturalist - ✗ Non-Naturalist - ✗
Intuition	Relativism	Relativist ✗
Intuition	Constructivism	Kantian - ✓ Humean - ✗

**Figure Eight – Appeal to Knowledge**

#### V. Conclusion

Now that we have run each of our three metaethical theories through all of the Appeals, it is time to analyze the results. Those results can be summed up in the following manner:

<u>Appeal</u>	<u>Passed?</u>	<u>Failed?</u>
Knowledge	Realism (Naturalism) Realism (Non-Naturalism) Relativism Constructivism (Kantian) Constructivism (Humean)	None
Universality	Realism (Naturalism) Realism (Non-Naturalism) Constructivism (Kantian)	Relativism Constructivism (Humean)
Intuition	Constructivism (Kantian)	Realism (Naturalism) Realism (Non-Naturalism) Relativism Constructivism (Humean)

**Figure Nine – Final Results**

Begin with realism. The non-naturalists passed the Appeal to Knowledge, and the Appeal to Universality, but failed the Appeal to Intuition. The naturalists passed the Appeal to Knowledge and the Appeal to Universality, and failed the Appeal to Intuition.

Move to relativism. The relativists passed the Appeal to Knowledge, but failed the Appeal to Universality and Appeal to Intuition.

Finally move to constructivism. The Humean constructivists passed the Appeal to Knowledge, but failed the Appeal to Universality and Appeal to Intuition. The Kantian constructivists, on the other hand, pass all three Appeals.



### **i. Kantian Constructivism**

We began this thesis searching for the best guide to a moral life. After exploring potential answers, the only metaethical guide to make the cut was Kantian constructivism. Before we conclude the thesis, I wanted to spend some time considering this particular theory. After all, passing all three Appeals is no small feat.

Let us begin by investigating the components of Kantian constructivism that may make it an appealing metaethical guide. There must be something special about it that sets it apart from the other theories we considered, beyond that it passes all three guidelines. At a very basic level, Kantian constructivism is agent dependent, and rooted in reason and rationality. While this may not seem like much, one of these components may serve as an explanation, but which one was it?

Was the Kantian's commitment to agent dependent moral facts the key to their success? While it may be an important facet of the Kantian's argument, it seems unlikely that their commitment to agent dependence is a lone catalyst. For example, Humean constructivism is also agent dependent, as is relativism. However, their commitment to agent dependent facts caused both theories to fail two out of the three Appeals. If it was not solely the agent dependency that did it, was it the Kantian constructivist's restrictions on agency which helped? This seems considerably more plausible as the Kantian constructivist's constraints on agency are more involved than others due to the reason and rationality components. Since no other theory bases their view in such principles, then reason and rationality must have contributed to Kantian constructivist's success as a metaethical theory.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to identify the best guide to a moral life. We explored realism, relativism, and constructivism, and relied on the teachings of four prominent moral philosophers to guide those explorations. Russ Shafer-Landau led our investigation of realism, Gilbert Harman took the reins for relativism, and Sharon Street teamed up with Christine Korsgaard to guide us through constructivism. Once the initial exploration was complete, I presented a unique set of guidelines to test these metaethical theories against. These guidelines, the ‘Appeals’, were the Appeal to Knowledge, the Appeal to Universality, and the Appeal to Intuition. Once the Appeals were established, the metaethical theories were put to the test. The proverbial ‘last man standing’ was Kantian constructivism.

If we have done everything correctly, Kantian constructivism, characterized by its focus on reason and rational agency, *should* be the answer to our initial question. However, I hesitate to conclude this thesis by presenting Kantian constructivism as that definitive answer. There still seem to be many unanswered questions. Those questions may be due, in part, to the heart of this thesis being based on highly theoretical concepts, namely the three Appeals. With this in mind, I would like to use my conclusion to explore some of those uncertainties.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that I may or may not be able to provide an answer for each question. In the event I cannot, my aim is to defend my position to the best of my ability.

**Question One: Could the Appeals be unfair tests of the theories?** While it could be a possibility, seeing as only one out of the three metaethical theories survived, it is unlikely the Appeals are unfair. In Chapter Two we saw that the Appeals are based on moral intuitions, and meant to capture common sense, internal consistency, and simplicity. Given their roots in such basic ideologies, if a theory strays from any of the Appeals, then it ought to have a good reason to do so. In the instances where a theory did not pass an Appeal, like the realists not passing the Appeal to Intuition, they failed to provide a convincing justification or doing so. Furthermore, the Appeals were carefully constructed so that they treated each theory fairly. This gave realism, relativism, and constructivism an equal opportunity to defend why their view did, or did not, pass a particular Appeal. Finally, the realists and constructivists were also analyzed according to each subgroup, so that, say, a problem for naturalist realists did not doom realism as a whole.

**Question Two: What if someone rejects the Appeals, what does that mean for your argument?** While the Appeals may be an essential piece of the puzzle, they are in no way indisputable. If one were to reject any, or all, of them, then my argument would crumble. However, such a rejection would not be devastating given what I am trying to accomplish. This thesis is rather ambitious, as it takes three heavily debated metaethical theories, puts them in conversation with one another, and somehow tries to evaluate them based on whether or not they truly capture morality. This is no small task. If my argument is able to shed even the smallest amount of light on the controversies surrounding these theories, then I have accomplished something, regardless of whether or not the Appeals endure.

**Question Three: You rely on four specific philosophers to explain the metaethical theories. What if they think that their theory failing a guideline is irrelevant to whether or not it can capture a moral life?** This is highly plausible. For example, Humean constructivism does not pass the Appeal to Intuition on the basis that an ideally coherent Caligula goes against our moral intuitions. However, Sharon Street could easily say, and does, that the idea of an ideally coherent Caligula is not a problem. For Humean constructivists, what the agent values is a function of their evaluative starting point. If there are moral facts, then they ought to be knowable by a variety of standpoints, not just reason and rationality. (Street 2010) Thus, Street would argue that not passing the Appeal is irrelevant, as the theory fails for something that is not inherently problematic.

While failing an Appeal may not be seen as a nail in the coffin, it does suggest that the theory is flawed in some way. Since the Appeals target basic principles such as simplicity, internal coherence, and common sense, it is not difficult to see how failing one of those principles would be problematic. In regard to Street's Caligula defense, while Street may argue that an ideally coherent Caligula is not a problem, there are many philosophers who believe it is, namely the Kantian constructivists and realists.

**Question Four: Is a truly moral life even possible?** The answer changes depending on which metaethical guide you follow. For the nihilists and moral skeptics, such a life is either impossible or highly unlikely. The realists and Kantian constructivists believe such a life is possible, though it may be difficult. Finally, for Humean constructivists and relativists, a moral life is definitely possible.

**Question Five: What about other metaethical theories, or other versions of the metaethical theories you looked at?** I choose realism, relativism, and constructivism for specific reasons. I have always been a proponent of realism; though I acknowledge the theory has its fair share of drawbacks like the ones discovered in this thesis. In contrast, I have always been critical of relativism and its context dependent moral facts. Thus, constructivism seemed like a reasonable middle ground, as it captured the pieces I liked from each theory. With that being said, given the time, I would definitely add other theories to the discussion.

**i. Final Remarks**

In the end this thesis may not be able to provide a definitive answer as to what the best metaethical theory is. However, it can make a contribution by saying the theories have their advantages and disadvantages. With those strengths and weaknesses in mind, we may have reason to believe Kantian constructivism is the strongest candidate. Nonetheless, these sorts of conversations rarely come to an end, which is part of the beauty of philosophy. While we may not have an answer to the question we initially set out to solve, we are, at the very least, one step closer than we were before. That, as far as I am concerned, is a victory.

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